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ABSTRACT

Political communication has influenced greatly the study of modern public relations. The development of modern public relations can be traced back to the Ancients of Greece. The definition of "political communication" when applied to public relations is typically corporate in nature. That is, public relations defines the role of political activity primarily as "public affairs." Political communication's contributions to the study of public relations are found in four areas: (1) political communication provides an historical context to the study and development of modern public relations; (2) it helps scholars understand the message, or more precisely the speech; (3) political communication has provided a "bottom-up" perspective to public relations practice found in grassroots campaigning; and (4) political communication, as an applied field, has helped move public relations theory and practice from a mass media orientation to explore the diffusion process underlying influence attempts. Political communication offers a variety of challenges to the study and practice of public relations. Political communication's exploration of how the message influences the public targeted adds a critical/empirical perspective to public relations theory, research, and practice. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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Political Communication:

Contributions to the Study of Public Relations

Don W. Stacks*

Presented at the

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Speech Communication Association

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Political Communication: Contributions to the Study of Public Relations[1]

As long as there have been power structures, there has been a need for political public relations. Although most students believe political public relations to be a rather new phenomenon, it can be traced back at least 5,000 years, to an essay, written about 3000 BC, that advised Kagemni, the eldest son of the Pharaoh Huni, how to effectively persuade. The oldest extant book dealing with political public relations is also a treatise on effective communication. The *Precepts,* composed in Egypt about 2675 BC by Ptah-Hotep was written for the guidance of the Pharaoh's son in persuading the Gods. Indeed, many of concepts public relations educators study and practitioners practice can be traced back to the Ancients.

This paper explores in a very general sense the contributions of political communication to the study of public relations. As evidenced already, one very real contribution is debunking the notion that public relations is (a) a young endeavor, (b) one tied solely to mass communication, and (c) that it is focused narrowly on the written word. Contemporary textbooks do not help by noting that public relations is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Although they go on to note that public relations' roots deep into history, and note that public relations was the function of much communication, they still leave a feeling that public relations is relatively young and an American concept.

Aside from establishing its heritage, what other contributions has the study of political communication made to public relations? First, I believe that we can trace the development of modern public relations theory, that which deals with moving or reinforcing the masses across a number of approaches, most of which are found in the

panel's other paper topics. However, since political communication encompasses these other elements, I'll deal with them shortly. Second, political communication is by nature a rhetorical, critical, and interpretative approach, it has contributed to our understanding of public relations by focusing on the messages presented. Third, while embracing human communication, political communication was one of the first areas to encompass "effects research." Finally, political communication required that its scholars and theorists clearly define and establish its publics; its application establishes what I like to call an additive interaction between interpersonal, small group, organizational, and mass communication. Given time constraints I will briefly outline these four areas.

Defining Political Communication

Political communication's roots probably go back to the first time humans attempted to rule through logic instead of physical violence. As long as there have been factions seeking power over others, political communication has been theorized and tested. Classical rhetors such as Plato and Aristotle and Cicero were interested in how influence was communicated via the political and legislative institutions of their day (Kaid, in press). Medieval rhetors such as Augustine, although concentrated primarily on religious concerns, explored the impact that communication from the pulpit had its publics. Much of the Reformation can be attributed to political communication strategy, a strategy that lead to great change in the way people and ultimately nations defined themselves. Political communication until late focused on theory that explored what Nimmo and Swanson (1990) call the "voter persuasion paradigm." Contemporary political communication, might best be defined as the "role of communication in the political

process" (Chaffee, 1975, 15). From this perspective, it is clear that political communication has influenced greatly the study of modern public relations.

The definition when applied to public relations, however, is typically *corporate* in nature. That is, public relations defines the role of political activity primarily as "public affairs," a term closely aligned with journalism and reporting of the relationship between the corporate world and democratic political processes. Public relations has taken a top down approach when considering political communication, focusing on the relationship of corporate to regulation and the regulator. Speech communication has added to this approach by switching the focus more to the audience, to the grassroots who maintain and sustain the politician. Political communication commentaries as applied communication can be traced to the early 1970s, examining public relations campaigns aimed not at national elections, but the more mundane local school board or bond election (e.g., Perry, 1973).

Contributions

Political communication's contributions to the study of public relations are found in four areas. First, political communication provides an historical context to the study and development of modern public relations. Second, it helps us understand the message, or more precisely the speech. Third, political communication has provided a "bottom-up" perspective to public relations practice found in grassroots campaigning. Finally, political communication, as an applied field, has helped move public relations theory and practice from a mass media orientation to explore the diffusion process underlying influence attempts. Political communication has also merged qualitative and quantitative methods that provide a better understanding of how the message effects the public.

1. Development of Modern Public Relations

As noted, we can trace the development of modern public relations to the Ancients. Although we might not consider incantations, prayers to the Gods, or arguments from oracles an essential part of public relations practice today, in their time such messages were aimed at a populace that accepted such arguments as readily as today's does based on a televised source such as Oprah, Geraldo, or Larry King. They were in effect staged events aimed at reassuring or motivating certain groups that actions planned were in line with what those who ruled over them (in reality the pharaoh, leader, etc.) desired. We find this in any political system, not just democracies. Any time factions desire to influence the masses through some form of communication, political communication comes to the fore. We find this in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome; in Modern Greece and Modern Rome; today in Washington and London, in Moscow and Peking.

A contribution of political communication comes from exploring the relationship of the oral message to the audience. This contribution has not changed since the time of Aristotle; it serves to offer the best available means of persuading an audience. Even as this audience has grown both in terms of numbers and sophistication, it is clear that it is the message — with all its logic (*logos*) and emotion (*pathos*) — that people remember. A second contribution comes in the second leg in this relationship between political communication and public relations and it is found in the concept of *ethos*. Perhaps Cicero said it best when he defined the rhetor as a "good man speaking well." Today we wouldn't be as blatantly sexist, but the concept of the "goodness" of the source is something that has clearly contributed to public relations strategy. Finally, over the ages, political communication contributed to the development of public relations by focusing

on the concept of audience. Different audiences require different messages; political communicators learned long ago that different renditions of the same message were necessary for different audiences. The speech given to an urban audience used urban language and examples; that same speech given to a rural audience employed rural language and examples. Methodologically, the speech became a cloze procedure in reverse.

2. Understanding the Message

Public relations efforts that focus around a particular source and his or her messages have been influenced greatly by rhetorical, critical, and interpretive communication approaches. The rhetorical and interpretative contributions are the scope of another paper, however, suffice it to note that the mainstay of speech and rhetoric research has been the analysis of political speakers and their speeches. Such analysis examines in great depth both the source and the message as a method to understand how and why the message was crafted as it was. The benefit is obvious — and we often find advanced copies of speeches given to news groups so that their rhetorical experts can explain the logic of the speech.

Beyond the simple understanding of the speech, however, is an analysis that leads to a better understanding of the political communication process. Critical methods, such as Buke's (1965) *pentadic* analysis or Bormann's (1972, 1973) *fantasy-theme analysis* or Fisher's (1985) *narrative analysis* provide an in-depth analysis of message beyond a the historical/descriptive level and attempt to provide some element of understanding of the motives behind the message. An excellent addition to the public relations literature from

speech communication can be found in Toth and Heath's (1992) edited volume, *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations*.

The implications for public relations should be obvious. The focus is on a well-crafted message tailored to a specific audience. However, critical theory also focuses on the audience at a cultural level as well.

Of interest to public relations scholars and practitioners is the relationship between source and receiver, between organization and its internal, external, and intervening audiences (Stacks, 1995). Critical theory contributes by looking at how the public is perceived by the source, often in economic terms. Consider, for example the problem facing Republicans as they move to their "Contract with America." From a critical theory perspective we have the ruling class (Congress), a labor class (those for whom whatever cuts will effect — the elderly, middle class and below — and an upper middle class — the industrialist, the physician, and the like. For Congress, the political party's own members constitute its internal audience, the external audience is constituted by the labor class, and the intervening audience the upper middle class. Clearly, different message strategies are required for each.

3. "Effects Research" and Public Relations

To this point it is clear that speech communication has contributed greatly to modern public relations. As evidenced by other presentations on this panel, speech communication has broadened both the theory and method by which scholars examine public relations — and ultimately how practitioners employ that theory and research. Political communication — an applied area of communication — adds to our knowledge base by examining the *effects* of messages (Kaid, in press). As such, political

communication research and theory has explored how the messages impact the larger audience; they explore the relationship of message to audience, the effect of that message as mass produced, and the mediated effect of that message on the audience. Effects theory and research focuses on how to set the agenda of a public (i.e., agenda setting theory, McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Bell, in press) and that public's uses or expected functions of the media (i.e., uses and gratifications theory, Bloomer & McQuail, 1969; McLeod & Becker, 1974; Rayburn, in press).

Effects research and theory has provided public relations the tools necessary to explore ways of identifying how a public uses the media and how the media, in turn, shape that public's agendas. This provides public relations ways of influencing the decision-making process from the grassroots. A current example is the continuing Perot use of the media to advance his political message from a grassroots campaign aimed at influencing decision-making at the national level.

Much of what we have seen to this point is qualitative in nature; "effects" provides a quantitative, empirical approach that, when taken with the qualitative provides a richer understanding of the communication process in particular and public relations as an application of that process in particular.

4. Diffusion of the Message — An Additive Function

As discussed by earlier presenters, speech communication has contributed to the study and practice of public relations by exploring other than media channels to a public. Political communication applied that contribution by exploring how the mediated message is diffused through the public. Obviously, we are talking of the diffusion of innovation as it applies to how the public takes a message and adopts it (e.g.,

Deutschmann and Danielson, 1960; Rogers, 1995). Traditional public relations, from the top-down perspective of information diffusion, focused primarily on the role of information providers. Political communication has helped to refocus that role to how the message has been accepted — adopted if you will — through transmission via small group and interpersonal communication. In this regard the study of political advertisements has contributed to how the message is diffused through a public.

Challenges

Political communication offers a variety of challenges to the study and practice of public relations. As technology advances, we generally find that political communication strategists at the front of new technology use. The ability to access a variety of media will create difficulty in identifying which media effectively present messages in a campaign. Obviously, access to information has changed, as has the safeguards we once placed on the appropriateness and trustworthiness we once placed on that information. From a grassroots perspective, anyone can become an information provider; all they need is access to a computer, modem, and the wide world web. Diffusion of the message will be harder to trace with access to new technologies.

Already we are seeing changes in how public relations campaigns are evaluated in much the same way we saw political campaigns changed by instant access to polling results, either after a major speech or event or an election. Important lessons in public relations theory and research can be gained from further exploration of political communication. Identifying how a message will be received by a campaign's various publics becomes more important as that public's access to information increases.

Theories of audience must be re-examined and cultural/critical theory will help the public relations theorist/practitioner to better under his or her public(s).

A particular challenge to public relations from a political perspective comes in the changes in how government will operate in the future. Shifts of power from a national to local level requires that we better understand how smaller audience segments use the media and how that media set their agendas. As governmental social support agencies are redefined, public relations will take on a larger role in communicating "new" images and positioning for increasingly tighter funding.

Summary

This paper has explored the contributions of an applied area of speech communication to the study and practice of public relations. Political communication's contributions to public relations by helping to establish its historical roots; understanding the message and its effects; and incorporating message diffusion as a top-down function to that employed from the bottom-up through a grassroots strategy. A focus on the message ties public relations to speech communication; political communication explored how that message influences the publics targeted, thus adding a critical/empirical perspective to public relations theory, research, and practice.

Notes

[1]I am indebted to an earlier review and commentary by Dr. Donn Tilson, School of Communication, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL.

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